

Sermon 23.04.09

Easter

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John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

SERMON:

I had walked up and down, back and forth through the cavernous Florence train station, my panic inching up. Twice I'd walked from one end to the other, now trying to find a WIFI hotspot so I could try and pull up the email with the specifics. 'Meet at the Florence train station' - that was my memory. Sounded easy enough. Little did I know that unlike the other stations I'd been through the past week, this one was not a single platform with a small waiting room. What was I thinking? This is Florence! And so, bag in one hand, trying to scroll with the other, when I heard "Kati", my head snapped up. Kati? Gianni?, I said - Could it be? I dropped my bag in relief, wanting to give this almost stranger a big bear hug. How did you know me? We'd only met once on zoom, and that was months ago. "I have a knack for remembering faces," he told me.

He recognized me. He called me by name.

I was safe.

As we wove our way out, I stuck by him like glue - not wanting to lose sight of him.

I can only imagine the relief Mary felt when she heard her name, recognized that voice. His voice.

Unlike the other gospel narratives, in this gospel account Mary is alone, desolate, as she approaches the tomb before the break of day - a literal and figurative walk in the dark. Cloaked in both night and grief she notices something is different, changed, and so she runs...

Runs and finds Simon Peter and the other disciple...

Breathlessly tells them his body is gone.

More running.

Bending down, out of breath, the disciple crouches down and peers in.

Notice the details our scripture offers:

(P 882 in pew bible)

"He sees the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself."

Important details - not to be missed -

The verb here for 'rolled up' (*entetyligmenon*) suggests that someone has performed this action¹. The linens are intentionally left there - not haplessly thrown aside by body snatchers.

The gospel goes on:

¹ Brandt, Jo-ann. 2011. *John*. Baker Academic Publishing Group. Grand Rapids, MI.

“Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed”

It's unclear what this disciple believes - that Jesus has risen from the dead? Or had he doubted Mary's testimony and now believes - indeed, the body is gone.

‘For as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.’

The writer leaves us puzzled as to what the disciples believe at this point. The men leave.

The scene begins and ends with Mary alone at the tomb.

‘But as Mary stood weeping’

This isn't Protestant, silent weeping - this is lamenting - wailing aloud, with streaming tears as a sign of the depth of her sorrow, as well as the added grief over the loss of the body.

‘Then, as she wept and wailed, she bent over to look into the tomb’.

In an action that mimics Peter, she looks in - but the space is not empty of all but the linens.

Mary sees two angels - one at the head and the other at the feet.

Mary seems strangely unperturbed by the angels' sudden appearance. In sharp contrast to the women in Luke who are terrified and bow their heads to the ground, or the guards in Matthew's gospel who are paralyzed with fear. Mary is so bent on her mission to attend to Jesus' body that she seems oblivious to the fact that she is talking to heavenly creatures.

‘Woman why are you weeping?’

Jesus, the gardener, then repeats the angels' question - the same question asked by another one she doesn't recognize.

The moment of recognition comes with a naming, 'Mary', and the response 'Rabbouni', teacher, the familiar form of address used by Jesus' disciples throughout the Gospel, to which Mary adds 'my' -

My Rabbi. My teacher.

She is overcome - with joy, with relief, with hope?

We don't know what happens next... did she reach out and grab him?

‘Do not hold onto me’ -

That might be better translated 'do not cling on me'. The Greek verb *haptou* suggests that she has flung her arms around him.

Do not cling. Go.

Go he says - and tell the others '*I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God*'.

Again, pay attention to the language - Jesus has introduced something new:

He refers to his followers as brothers and sisters, a term this gospel writer hasn't been used before; the God, to whom Jesus has referred as exclusively 'my Father' has now become 'our Father'.

The resurrection is the beginning of a new relationship - an intimacy of belonging.

When Mary saw the gardner for who he really was, calling him Rabbouni - *my* teacher -

I wonder, what did Jesus hear in her voice?

Did he hear how she wanted him back the way he was so they could go back to the way they were, back to the old life where everything was familiar and not frightening like it was now?

Rabbouni - that was the old name.

Rabbouni - that was his Friday name², and here it was Sunday - an entirely new day in an entirely new life.

Mary's lingering and grieving is met by the presence of Christ.

This one she knew so well, the one who is unrecognizable.

Like Mary, Christ's presence among us might not always be obvious.

Christ's invitation to new life is almost always unfamiliar and surprising, even disconcerting.

We may overlook Christ among us altogether.

When Mary recognizes Jesus, she is so excited that she wants to *grab* him.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. 1999. *Home By Another Way*. Cowley Publications, MA. P 111.

But Jesus says to her, *“Don’t hold on to me, Mary.”*

Later, Jesus will say the opposite to Thomas—inviting Thomas to touch his wounds.

But Mary’s response of grasping is different from Thomas’s doubt and skepticism.

“Holding on,” clinging to Jesus isn’t the same as following him.

As much as Mary Magdalene loves him, as faithful and passionate as she is, he says to her,

“Let go.”

I wonder...

I wonder if sometimes we may hold onto Jesus too tightly, as well.

We may put Jesus in a box instead of letting him lead the way or challenge us.

We want our teacher to be only a source of safety and certainty;

Not seeing the one who invites us to take risks, to step into the unknown with him.

We see what we want to see instead of what God is inviting us to become.

Might we be holding on too tightly to Jesus or our idea of Jesus?

Perhaps we also need to hear Jesus say,

Don’t hold on to me.

Don’t put me in a box.

Perhaps we also need to hear Jesus say,

Don’t get stuck - your ways of following in the past - they’re the past. Don’t cling to them, holding on so tightly there’s no space for new ways.

Perhaps we also need to hear Jesus say,

I call you ahead—through my resurrection, to a new reality. The unknown. The kingdom, here.

My friends, the tomb is empty.

yes...

Jesus goes ahead of us.

The tomb is empty.

Jesus instructs us to 'let go', to be open to something new. Alive.

And so

We choose another way...

We choose to create beauty.

We don't negate the pain and suffering of Jesus. It is here, always here.

And it's not the end.

This morning we take the fragile beauty of a flower and turn that which symbolized violence, humiliation, death, into something else, something new.

We choose to create beauty, one stem at a time. Stem upon stem. Each of us brings not just one stem, but to turn this into something bursting with life, we need to come to the cross with many stems.

Take 4 or 5 - we want all these flowers to cover the cross.

My friends, the tomb is empty. There is a new world, the kingdom of God, always in our midst.

Jesus goes ahead of us. Alleluia!

Resources:

Brandt, Jo-ann. 2011. *John*. Baker Academic Publishing Group. Grand Rapids, MI.

Heidi Haverkamp, [Sunday's Coming: Christian Century](#)

Taylor, Barbara Brown. 1999. *Home By Another Way*. Cowley Publications, MA.